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ABSTRACT

This brief overview of minimum competency testing and disabled high school students discusses: the inclusion or exclusion of handicapped students in minimum competency testing programs; approaches to accommodating the individual needs of handicapped students; and legal issues. Surveys of states that have mandated minimum competency tests indicate that many states' requirements specifically mention provisions for handicapped students. The method of test administration is often modified, and should be based on the modifications indicated in the student's individualized educational program (IEP). Approaches which have been used by states include: (1) the exclusion of severely handicapped students; (2) use of different graduation requirements, such as completion of the IEP or a different weight for the test score; and (3) testing modifications which allow physically disabled students to complete the test, such as Braille editions. Legal problems may arise when certain students are not allowed to take the minimum competency test, and are therefore denied the opportunity to earn a diploma. Problems of discrimination may also arise if remedial instruction is not available to disabled students, or if evaluation standards are applied inconsistently within a state. (GDC)

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MINIMUM COMPETENCY TESTING AND THE HANDICAPPED

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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ANNOTATION: Approaches taken to accommodate handicapped students in a minimum competency testing program for high school graduation and the legal issues involved are examined.

KEY WORDS: Minimum Competency Testing, Secondary Education, Disabilities, Graduation Requirements, Legal Problems, State Programs, Special Education, Testing Problems, Test Construction

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Most states have instituted some type of minimum competency testing (MCT) program. Many of these programs require that students pass the MCT in order to receive a high school diploma. This brief report will review some of the approaches that have been taken to accommodate handicapped students in an MCT program, and some of the legal issues involved.

THE INCLUSION OR EXCLUSION OF HANDICAPPED STUDENTS IN MCT PROGRAMS

A survey of the states that have MCT requirements found that many had explicitly mentioned handicapped students in their legislation (4). These states have taken various approaches to accommodate the needs of handicapped students: excluding them from the test requirement, student's IEP as the basis for the graduation requirement, establishing different standards for handicapped students, modifying the testing procedures for handicapped students, or making no modification for handicapped students.

The choice of approach should be based on the modifications that the student needs in his or her educational program (1). Some students merely require slight modifications of their learning environment; their educational goals are very similar to those of non-handicapped students. For these students, modifications in the administration procedures of a test may be sufficient. Some students require a substantially modified curriculum and/or instructional goals; their educational programs are noticeably different from the programs of non-handicapped students. For these students, different standards may need to be established. Finally it may be most appropriate to exempt severely or profoundly handicapped students from MCT programs.

APPROACHES TO ACCOMMODATING THE NEEDS OF HANDICAPPED STUDENTS

Different states have taken different approaches to accommodating handicapped students in their MCT programs. One approach is to exclude handicapped students from the MCT requirement. This approach has not been used by any state for all handicapped students. However, some states have used this option for multiply-handicapped or trainable retarded students.

A different approach is to use successful completion of the student's individualized education program (IEP) as the standard for graduation (5). The IEP may or may not include a competency test of some kind as part of the graduation requirement. In some states, the IEP specifies if the student should receive a regular diploma or a certificate of attendance. In other states, the IEP specifies modified testing procedures. Twelve states with MCT programs use the IEP in some way to specify graduation requirements for special education students.

Some states require that handicapped students take the regular MCT, but establish different standards as a graduation requirement. For example, they might set a lower passing score, or weight grades and teacher ratings more heavily than for non-handicapped students. In several states, a special diploma or certificate of attendance is awarded to special education students who do not pass the MCT.

One very common approach is to modify the test administration procedures to accommodate some types of handicaps. For instance, audio cassette or Braille versions of the test are provided for blind students; the test is administered in sign language for deaf students; the time limits are extended; answers are recorded by a proctor rather than the examinee; or certain types of test items are omitted from the test. Usually, such test modifications are left to the discretion of the local school district.

In a few states, a different competency test is used for students with specific handicaps. This

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approach has the potential for legal problems if handicapped students are not allowed to take the regular test and are granted a special diploma.

In some states, handicapped students must take the regular competency test. No special accommodations are made, and no special diplomas are granted. A similar approach leaves the decision about whether, and how, to test handicapped students to the local school district.

LEGAL ISSUES

Adding an MCT to the graduation requirements of handicapped students does not seem to raise severe legal problems. "However, if MCT is used as a graduation requirement and certain students are not allowed to take the test (and thus are denied the opportunity to earn a diploma), a protected right might be impaired"(3).

Another legal issue centers around the provision of remedial education to students who do not pass the MCT. Most states provide remedial programs for students who do not pass the test. Discrimination might be charged if the handicapped student is denied access to the remedial programs available to non-handicapped students because he or she is already involved in a special education program.

A final legal problem associated with the inclusion of handicapped students in MCT programs is the inconsistent application of evaluation standards within local school districts or across school districts. This is a common problem when local school districts are allowed to modify, or waive, the test requirement with little or no guidance from the state.

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